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CPCC's Zeiss
Offers an Educated
Perspective on Charlotte

Dr. P. Anthony Zeiss
President
Central Piedmont
Community College



Harper Campus



Central Campus



Harris Campus



North Campus



Cato Campus



Levine Campus



SAVANT LEADER

CPCCC's Zeiss Offers an Educated Perspective on Charlotte



Charlotte's no stranger to 10-year progress plans, but a leader who's long watched from an educator's viewpoint offers a bit different perspective.

"We need a concrete vision," says Dr. P. Anthony (Tony) Zeiss, the 17-year president of nationally acclaimed Top-10 Central Piedmont Community College (CPCCC), as he contemplates the next decade. Not surprisingly, his school figures prominently.

Zeiss is adamant that the picture for Charlotte in 2020 should be sharply focused, rather than an amorphous concept such as "world-class city."

"I've been to a lot of world-class cities and I wouldn't want ours to be just like them," he says. "Charlotte needs to continue the momentum of building on its strengths—drawing on its people and resources—to make it all that it can be."

As a recognized leader, speaker and resource in work force and economic development, Zeiss, offers a succinct mission statement: "Charlotte intends to be the world's leader in prosperity, compassion and livability."

The area already boasts those three qualities, he quickly adds, but can improve on each. To do so requires efforts regionally as well as state-wide and nationally.

Compassion and Livability

For compassion, Zeiss cites Charlotte's leadership in supporting non-profit efforts such as the CROP Hunger Walk, Habitat for Humanity and the Arts & Science Council. Such strong generosity figures only to grow, he feels, especially with more civic involvement from non-profit executives.

"But it can't be just non-profit leaders," he admonishes. "You've got to have good educational leadership, good business leadership and job-creators. We have to have entrepreneurs. And all of them have to work together. The future belongs to the innovators.

"There are some very bright people with the Chamber and with the Charlotte Regional Partnership and Center City," he continues. "The old leadership model of four or five guys making important decisions is gone."

For livability, Zeiss gushes ideas and projects. Take green space, for example.

As chair of the Little Sugar Creek Action Committee, Zeiss has been instrumental in putting together a 15-mile greenway that starts in north Charlotte and runs to the South Carolina border. His committee wants to expand it and has buy-in from leaders on both sides of the state line, in neighboring Gaston and York counties.



“We need a concrete vision. The picture for 2020 should be sharply focused, rather than an amorphous concept such as ‘world-class city.’ I’ve been to a lot of world-class cities and I wouldn’t want ours to be just like them. Charlotte needs to continue the momentum of building on its strengths—drawing on its people and resources—to make it all that it can be...I’m optimistic about Charlotte. The synergy is here and the energy is here. We’ve got the right people and a wonderful climate. And we’ve got good educational institutions.”

~ Tony Zeiss
President

Out of that support and the good work of Trust for Public Land and Catawba Lands Conservancy came the idea for the Carolina Thread Trail project which is under Ruth Shaw’s direction. It would extend green areas for 258 miles through 15 counties.

Zeiss is making sure that at least the Sugar Creek Greenway melds an appreciation for area history. It will feature 21 bronze statues of historic Mecklenburg notables.

The first will adorn a greenway section near the main CPCC campus and it will be a likeness of Capt. James Jack. Jack was the local patriot who courtered by horseback three copies of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress. He completed his ride in June 1775, more than a year before that body authored the Declaration of Independence for the United States.

Other statues will depict Thomas Spratt, one of the area’s first white settlers, and King Haigler of the Catawba Indians.

Prosperity Linked to Jobs

For perhaps the most important of the three vision qualities—prosperity—the main ingredient is jobs, according to Zeiss.

To promote job creation, he’d like to rein in a Congress he sees as spending wildly and creating laws that are often anti-capitalistic.

On the state level, he wishes for tax reform. “Corporate taxes here are through the roof which is why so companies move across the border to South Carolina,” he observes.

Perhaps surprisingly, Zeiss makes

manufacturing prominent in his job thoughts. Despite widespread diminution in industries such as textiles and furniture, he believes the sector can enjoy a promising future.

“Manufacturing is alive and well,” Zeiss says. “We have to make sure we’ve got the right trade policies in place.”

For an example, he uses Charlotte-based steel-maker Nucor. Chief executive Dan DiMicco has testified to Congress about leveling the playing field with China and other foreign steel producers.

Here at home, DiMicco has bought into a CPCC plan to develop skilled, mobile workers for Nucor’s far-flung plants. He funded a Nucor Scholars Program to train workers to his company’s specifications.

For a larger manufacturing vision, Zeiss has pieced together grants, including one from Duke Energy, to establish a program called Integrated Systems Technology. It cross-trains students in various trades, such as electronics and hydraulics, so employers can save money with more versatile—and more valuable—workers.

“We have very few of our own students in there because it’s full of people from manufacturing firms,” Zeiss says. “Working together with industry and education—that’s how you develop a model to out-compete anybody in the world.”

Distribution is important, and Zeiss likes the plan to place an inter-modal center that features rails, air cargo service and roads at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. He cites high-quality access to Charleston, the country’s third-largest port.

And don’t slight roads, he advises. “As much as

people get excited about light rail, you still have to have basic roads. We’re not that dense.” On his list of critical thoroughfare additions and improvements are a Monroe bypass, a widening of I-485 in the south, and a Gaston County toll road.

Another potential jobs bonanza, Zeiss believes, will result from Jim Rogers’ efforts to establish Charlotte as the energy hub of America. To train workers for CEO Rogers’ Duke Energy as well as Shaw Industries and the area’s rapidly growing number of other related firms, Zeiss is raising funds for a CPCC energy training center. He’s enlisted help from representatives Mel Watt and Larry Kissel in the U.S. House.

Promotes Innovation and Creativity

Zeiss is emphatic about Charlotte’s need for a medical school which could help train health caregivers to administer to aging baby boomers. While he hopes Charlotte can someday be home for such an institution, he points to an interim answer—CPCC’s newest structure called the Allied Health Building. It brings nine allied-health and associate-degree health programs under one roof for the first time.

He means for his school to continue providing skilled workers to the financial sector, which remains a Charlotte strength with institutions such as Bank of America and Wachovia-Wells Fargo, as well as regional powerhouse BB&T.

“We have a financial services institute and it will just get bigger,” he says. “We provide customized training based on financial institutions’ needs to be more competitive.” ➤

“You’ve got to have good educational leadership, good business leadership and job-creators. We have to have entrepreneurs. And all of them have to work together. The future belongs to the innovators. There are some very bright people with the Chamber and with the Charlotte Regional Partnership and Center City. The old leadership model of four or five guys making important decisions is gone.”

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President

As the area’s defense industry concentration burgeons with names such as General Dynamics, Goodrich and Zapata Engineering, Zeiss and staff are working on how to serve them better.

Overall, he’s sure of the need to promote innovation and creativity. “We want to keep bright young people in our city,” he says. “We want to encourage them and help them as much as possible.”

A promising sign is at CPCC’s Center for Entrepreneurialism. It teaches people how to start a business.

“We’re up 80 percent in entrepreneurial class enrollments,” Zeiss says. “These are people who have good ideas. They have a good American spirit of entrepreneurialism. In the long run, that’s where most of our new jobs come from.”

It reinforces his strong faith in capitalism. “If you just back off and let the free market system

work,” he vows, “it will work.”

But he warns that education must improve. “We have to do a better job of aligning the curriculum and achievement standards between the college and K-12,” he says, adding that 70 percent of recent high school graduates who enroll at CPCC need remediation classes.

With grant money from Dick Spangler’s family, Zeiss and staff hope to implement an initiative at West Charlotte High to test African-American males in the 9th or 10th grades to determine any deficiencies for teachers to address before they graduate.

Peter Gorman, superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, is interested in the concept and it has captured the attention of Bill and Melinda Gates, who visited CPCC recently. Their foundation seeks a national basic skills remedial model which will double the number of post-high school completers; Zeiss hopes that model can be developed right here.

The Gates’ message was that more people have to be educated with skills to get a job, Zeiss says, adding that “illiteracy is probably the worst disease we have in this society.” Nearly a quarter of the adult population—23 percent—is functionally illiterate.

Resources to Meet the Needs

As usual, CPCC needs more funding to be an effective leader, Zeiss says. The school enrolls about 70,000 on its central campus and five satellites, making it the largest of the state’s 58 community colleges. But its funding is down \$10 million and enrollment has jumped 35 percent in three years.

CPCC has instituted various cost-saving measures. Still, there is an urgent need for additional dollars.

“Fortunately, I enjoy raising money,” says Zeiss. “I’d say a full 50 percent of my time is fundraising, probably more than that, because I’m always attentive to fundraising opportunities.”

He’s proud that, when consultants advised that it was only possible to raise \$7.5 million, their foundation’s recent five-year CPCC campaign garnered more than \$28 million in community contributions.

But most of that went to scholarships, leaving Zeiss to find more money to hire teachers to meet bulging enrollments. On that front, he’s tapped

the resources of generous givers such as Ron and Katherine Harper and Leon and Sandra Levine.

He’s thankful for a sympathetic ear from Gov. Beverly Perdue. In state funding, CPCC got cut 6 percent, but she recently rescinded 2 percent of that.

“I want to put in a plug for Beverly Perdue,” he says. “She gets it. Being a former educator, she understands how critical these community colleges are to economic recovery.”

Making a Difference

Zeiss has harbored a zeal for education since a self-described epiphany when he was a 13-year-old in rural Indiana.

“I remember thinking how wonderful life was and what a privilege it was,” he muses. “That’s when I decided I wanted to make a positive difference in others for God.”

He thought about the ministry but chose education.

He got a bachelor’s in Speech Education and a master’s in Radio/Television, both from Indiana State University. His doctorate is in Higher Education Administration from Nova Southeastern University of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

He worked his way to executive dean at Central Texas College, then served seven years as president of Pueblo Community College before joining CPCC in 1992.

“I like the community college mission because that’s where the most good is being done for the most people,” he says.

“The most gratifying part of what I do is looking at the hope and pride in our students’ eyes when they come across that stage to collect their degree or certificate,” he adds.

“Most of these people have struggles” he goes on. “They’re single parents. They’ve got one, two or three jobs. They’re raising kids and they don’t have money to go to school, but they know that getting some sort of credential or degree is critical.

“They don’t want a hand out; they want a hand up. That’s what community colleges do. We give them a chance to have a vision. And that’s the most important thing, whether it’s for an individual or a community.”

At 63, Zeiss hopes to lead his school for several more years and to be involved in civic affairs long afterward. That’s at least a decade of progress to influence.

“I’m optimistic about Charlotte,” Zeiss sums up. “The synergy is here and the energy is here. We’ve got the right people and a wonderful climate. And we’ve got good educational institutions.” 

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Dr. Paul Anthony (Tony) Zeiss, President, CPCC
Education: B.S. (Speech Education), 1968; M.S. (Radio and Television), 1972 (Indiana State University); Ed.D. (Higher Education Administration), 1979 (Nova Southeastern University)
Accomplishments: During tenure, CPCC has grown from one campus to six and has become recognized as a national leader in work force development
Authored/Co-authored: Several books on economic development, adult literacy and national work force development; four books on creating high performance employees, a novel based on the War Between the States, and a book on Community College Leadership
Associations: Past Board Chair, American Association of Community Colleges and League for Innovation; Association of Community College Trustees’ National CEO of the year (2004-05); NCCCS President of the Year (2002); serves on several local, regional and national boards and is a workgroup member for the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor
Speaker: Professional speaker and member of the National Speaker’s Association; frequent keynoter on recruiting, developing, and retaining peak performers at the workplace; consults regularly with states and regions on economic development